

SOFiA

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

We Did It!

This year, our Committee took the bold step of planning a simpler, shorter Conference and it worked. Attendance was similar to last year and it felt like a Conference of old. It also introduced a public Lloyd Geering Lecture and began Conference with brief presentations from three speakers.

As if that wasn't enough, the AGM debated name change proposals and revamped our Constitution, which is encapsulated in a set of Rules.

The failure of the proposed names (Rethinking Religion and Quest) to win out against the current name was disappointing, at least for those who have worked on the process for deciding on a new name that Doug Sellman led. What we have is a compromise solution that doesn't step boldly into a new phase but does downplay the problem word 'faith'. A future newsletter will focus on this word. While it is an obstacle for outsiders, there are interesting insights to be gathered from an examination of it.

This issue includes thoughts from Doug Sellman, our outgoing chairperson, a memorial of Barbara Purchas, provided by her husband Roger, a book review and a reflection on a song by Jewel.

This issue also comes with a Conference Supplement. This should give those who didn't attend a good impression of it and be a reminder for those who did. Steve Collard has provided an excellent summary. I have also included the talks or the summaries that the authors provided. The conversation between David Hanna and Hana Olds and the Panel Discussion were ad libbed so there is no document for publication. *The Editor*

Outgoing Reflections

Eighteen months ago I was feeling quietly reconciled to the apparent decline of the Sea of Faith and wrote the following in the March 2018 newsletter:

"I must admit I am now largely resigned to the possibility we are living in the last days of the Sea of Faith. However, I no longer feel downhearted at this thought. The Sea of Faith has been a spiritual life-saver for many of us and an inspiring "talk-fest" for all of us. It would be appropriate to celebrate by resolutely retaining the name Sea of Faith to the end."



Chairperson

By the end of that year I found myself, surprisingly, the Chairperson of the Sea of Faith Network NZ and having just offered to run a 2-day non-residential conference in Christchurch when there were no volunteers to run another 3-day residential conference. This predicament ignited action in me in contrast to my previous state of sitting and happily waiting for the end to come.

Turning the Tide?

I thought to myself, here is an opportunity to give it a go and see if the receding tide of the Sea of Faith could be turned and was delighted that others on the Committee felt similarly. And so we embarked on a year of reviewing the name of the Sea of Faith as a prelude to ushering in a refreshed organization, as well as setting to work on

running a new formatted conference that would be more viable for the future.

It is now a year on and I am now stepping down from the Committee (in accordance with the Rules) - a good time to reflect on how it's all gone.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I want to acknowledge once again my SoF 2019 committee comrades, each of whom contributed enormously to the business during 2019: **Steve Collard** (diligent and dependable secretary), **Philip Grimmert** (dedicated and ever cheerful treasurer), **Jan Calvert** (willing and committed local groups coordinator), **Natali Allen** (many wise encouraging words), **Brian Ellis** (independent thinker), **Andrew Calvert** (independent thinker), **Laurie Chisholm** (always constructive and thoughtful), **Pete Cowley** (helpful and SoF knowledgeable), and finally the excellent **Ian Crumpton** who, along with his equally excellent wife **Tricia** and me, formed a very efficient local organising group for the conference.

Disappointment

As I mentioned at the closing of Conference, I was disappointed about the AGM's rejection of Rethinking Religion as a new name for the Sea of Faith. I really thought Rethinking Religion (Values, Meaning and Spirituality) would work well as a new name for a new era following the exhaustive 12-month process we had engaged in during which over 100 alternative names were systematically considered. But the collective mind has spoken and we are now SOFiA (Sea of Faith in Aotearoa). This change represents a vote for a minor tweak of the current look and functioning of the Sea of Faith rather than to embark on a quest for more radical

rethinking and development. We remain a Faith group and many members are positively delighted about that.

2-Day Conference

The experiment of running a 2-day rather than 3-day conference seems to have been a pretty successful one with at least the same number of registrants as at the 2018 conference, and generally positive feedback about the new format from a scan of the feedback forms. Further, given the waning SoF financial position it was also pleasing to see Conference turn a small profit. All Souls, Merivale was a brilliant venue, and the novelty of having three short introductory presentations at the outset is definitely something for future conferences to consider again. The inaugural Sir Lloyd Geering lecture as a public meeting within the conference was a further successful new addition to the conference which brought twenty or thirty extra people to the conference for the evening. Despite these various innovations, the presence of keynote presentations followed by core groups and a final Panel made us all feel we were at a Sea of Faith conference of old. Adrian Skelton once again expertly chaired the expanded Panel of seven speakers.

No Sir Lloyd Geering!

This is the first year since 1993 that Lloyd wasn't at the conference in person, which was distinctly sad for many of us, though he was very much there in spirit. Time will tell whether the annual conference can survive without Lloyd's presence.

I wish the new SOFiA Committee the very best, while I now settle back into the quiet state of mind I was in 18 months ago.

*Doug Sellman
Outgoing Chairperson*

About SOFiA

SOFiA (The Sea of Faith in Aotearoa) is a network of people interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of values, meaning and spirituality. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives.

SOFiA is not a church: it is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and perspectives. SOFiA itself has no creed; its members come from many faiths and from those with no attachment to any religious institution. If you are in sympathy with our aims, you are most welcome to join us; receive our Newsletter, attend a local group and/or come to our Conferences.

We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from “Sea of Faith”, the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

Committee

Our national Committee oversees the work of SOFiA.

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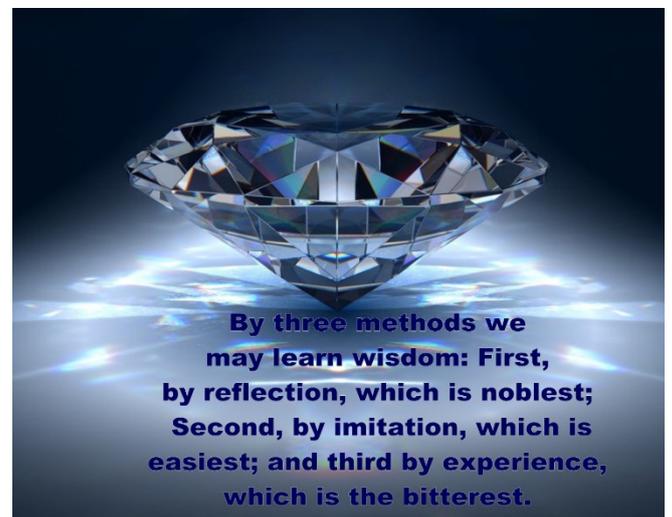
Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Ian Harris and Noel Cheer (deceased). Also Suzi Thirwell, Yvonne Curtis and Peter Cowley.

Publication deadline for the next Newsletter is 7 December 2019.

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Our new name, SOFiA, is an acronym for “Sea of Faith in Aotearoa as well as a play on words. Sophia is the Greek word for wisdom. Here is what the Chinese philosopher Confucius had to say about learning wisdom:



Book Review

Sapiens — A Brief History of Humankind, by Yuval Harari

Sapiens is a history of the human species, from hunter-gatherer times through to the present. Harari describes broad patterns and themes that, he argues, help understand and explain human history, from human beginnings through to modern times. As Laurie Chisholm commented in his review of Harari's later book "Homo Deus" in the March 2019 newsletter, Harari is a master of the grand generalisation.

In Harari's account, three major revolutions have shaped human society — a cognitive revolution around 70,000 years ago, an agricultural revolution around 11,000 years ago, and the scientific revolution in the 1500s. It finishes with a speculative peek into the future.

At the time of the cognitive revolution, humans started doing things no animal had done before. It was around this time that they acquired the skills, and perhaps the vision, that allowed them to break out of Africa and Asia and settle other parts of the world. Modern language skills may date back to around this time, or earlier.

Religion is, in Harari's account, "a system of human norms and values that is founded on a belief in a superhuman order." In the move from hunter-gatherer societies of perhaps 100 or 200 to settled agricultural societies of thousands or tens of thousands, religious myths gave rulers a sense of legitimacy and credibility that lay beyond human authority. The ruler who could claim divine authority was better placed to enforce that authority than a tribal leader whose place in the pecking order was more easily open to challenge. Universal religions have been the third great unifier of human kind, alongside money and empires, with competing ideologies that have led to wars and genocides.

Other myths that have helped order human societies have included ideas of nation, justice, and human rights, and the monetary system. The monetary system relies on belief in a myth that does its job only so long as we believe in it. A loss of public confidence in the banking system brings a financial crash. Is this, also, how it is with human society? The better society for which we crave will come only if enough of us believe in it.

The scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries has provided the technology that has allowed humans to transform both the society and the world outside. Mythical stories have been replaced by theories that can be falsified — no concept or idea is sacred and beyond challenge. The changes from the time preceding the scientific revolution have been breath-taking.

Harari discusses the changes — positive and negative, that have come from harnessing science in the service of capitalism. Free market capitalism does not ensure that profits are gained in a fair way, or distributed in a fair way. Witness the Atlantic slave trade, colonial wars of conquest, the first opium war fought between Britain and China, and countless other crimes that accompanied the growth of the modern economy. While steps have been taken, starting in the early 20th century, to rein in capitalism, there has been an uneasy alliance with modern consumerism that is "destroying the foundations of human prosperity in an orgy of reckless consumption. On the positive side, there have been large improvements, for the majority of humans alive today, in the standard of living and in human health. But, are we any happier?

Towards the end, Harari argues that the next stage of human history will involve biological and technological changes that will change human consciousness and identity, calling the very term "human" into question. Mary Shelley's "Dr. Frankenstein" may be closer to becoming a reality than we

are willing to believe. We should, however, learn from history that attempts to predict the future course of technological development may, due to unforeseen barriers, never materialise.

Homo sapiens, Harari suggests, will become *Homo Deus*, if humans do not destroy themselves first. Humans are today, Harari argues, on the way to becoming “self-made gods” who are “irresponsible” and “discontented.” Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who do not know what they want?

In total, the book is a bold attempt to provide a broad framework for understanding the forces that have driven human history. Whether or not one agrees with him, he provides a useful starting point for thinking about the forces that have operated, and will operate, to shape human societies.

John Maindonald

Sapiens — A Brief History of Humankind (Harvill Secker, 2011), by Yuval Harari.

Remembering Barbara Purchas

Prior to her death on 7 August 2019, Barbara Jeanne Purchas (1942-2019) was the leader of a small Sea-of-Faith group in Palmerston North that met monthly in private homes to discuss a wide range of topics of relevance to various religions and spirituality.



Barbara with Granddaughter Ella

Discussion centred on a specific topic at each meeting helped by notes prepared by a member, but Barbara encouraged the

discussion amongst all those present to range widely around and outside the selected topic in often unpredictable ways. Since her passing the group has gone into abeyance. As noted by one member, Barbara was really the heart and soul of the group.

So, who was Barbara? She was born Barbara Jeanne Zook on 18 June, 1942 in Detroit, Michigan. Her Mother was accomplished at a wide range of crafts, a passion that she passed on to her daughter, while her Father was an engineer as well as an expert glider pilot who grew up in an Amish family in Pennsylvania. Although he left the Amish church/culture, family ties were very strong and Barbara and her family have maintained close contact with relatives in the Amish community. Visits to the farms and homes of her Amish cousins in Pennsylvania have been very important highlights for her during our recent visits to the United States. This was because of the people rather than the way of life. Barbara has given talks to several groups in New Zealand on the history and nature of the Amish church and culture.

Barbara with her two younger brothers grew up in suburban Detroit until she graduated from high school, after which she attended a liberal arts university/college at Albion in Southern Michigan where she earned a four-year arts degree with majors in chemistry and mathematics in 1965. Although the Zook family were not regular church participants, Barbara did attend the Methodist church during her high school and college days, mainly for social and music-related reasons, as she was never completely comfortable with some aspects of the beliefs and theology espoused.

Her next move was from the relatively small Albion College to the much larger Michigan State University (more than 50,000 students) where she was employed in a lab in the Department of Food Science to conduct research associated with fatty acids. The job there developed into a Masters program, so the four-year period at MSU was a fruitful one for her, that ended with a post-graduate degree, a husband (and new name), and a new baby boy. Based on numerous discussions, Barbara and I found that our

thoughts on religious and spiritual matters were very much in harmony with broad non-dogmatic interests in many religions and the ideas of many writers on these subjects. Our library, built up mainly by Barbara, is testament to that with books including some by Cupitt, Geering, Spong, Tillich, Buber, Armstrong, Benedikt, Thiering, Holloway, de Chardin and Robinson.

When Barbara with her family (now with two boys) arrived in Palmerston North in 1973, after spending three years in Australia, she became re-acquainted with the Methodist church and particularly with choir singing that was very important to her, even though she often commented again that she was not too sure about the theology behind some of the words and sentiments they were singing about. The same applied to the material that she sang with the Palmerston North Choral Society in which she was a long-serving member.

When she first learned about the Sea of Faith network from a friend several years ago, Barbara immediately recognised it as probably being a group where we were likely to meet up with others interested in discussing the sorts of things we had talked about together for many years. This proved to be the case, and she has been a dedicated and active member at local meetings and also at the two conferences we have attended.

This outline has focussed mainly on aspects of Barbara's life of relevance to Sea of Faith, but there are many other facets of Barbara that are at least as important. These include being an exceptional mother and grandmother, involvement in too many types of craft to list here, and being a good friend to many people and particularly those in need. To all these activities she brought her generous, friendly, intelligent and compassionate personality. She was always interested in just about everything and especially in people and in their interests. In short, she was a "big-hearted" woman; but sadly on the morning of 7 August 2019, after 77 years of doing a very good job, Barbara's heart was unable to carry on any longer. A tragedy. She is sorely missed.

Roger Purchas

Faith vs Belief

Ian Harris generously offered two of his Otago Daily Times columns as well as a number of quotations on this topic. Your editor includes the following from his Honest to God column of May 2004:

At one point in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* Alice exclaims "One can't believe impossible things", only to have the Queen of Hearts assure her that it was all a matter of practice. "When I was your age," she said, "I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

For some people looking in on Christianity, that's what being Christian seems to amount to. The churches make assertions that stretch the credulity of the modern mind, and if you believe them you're in, if you don't you're out.

In my view, those who think that Christianity is beyond belief are quite right. However, it was never meant to be believed. It was meant to offer a way of faith, which is quite another matter.

The source of confusion lies buried deep in the English language, for *believe* has changed its meaning radically since the King James Version of the Bible was published in 1611. Up to around that time *believe* meant to "hold dear" or to "love" – in fact the *lieve* of believe is a close cousin of *love*. (There used also to be a verb *belove*, meaning to love, but that has dropped out of the language except in the vestige "beloved".)

The noun *belief* carried a similar meaning. It meant holding as beloved, staking one's confidence on, or putting one's trust in. So a preacher around 1300 warned his congregation that "Christian men should not set their belief on worldly goods".

About that same time another word with the same meaning was adopted from French. This was *faith*, meaning loyalty or fidelity; and gradually it edged out *belief* in that older sense of the word. By the time King James set his translators to work, the switch was virtually complete: "faith" occurs 246 times in the version of the Bible he initiated, "belief" only once.

But there was a problem. *Faith* had no matching verb. So the translators continued to use *believe* in its old sense of “hold dear, give one’s heart to, commit oneself to”. Thus when Jesus says: “Don't be afraid, only believe”, he means “commit yourself”, or “have faith”.

Another important shift was beginning to happen. For most of the world's history, and in all major religions, faith (or belief in the old sense) was assumed to be in relation to a transcendental reality where God was taken for granted. You committed yourself to this reality or you did not, but you did not question the fact of it.

Then people did begin to question it. Instead of the focus being on faith in relation to what was assumed to be true, people began to discuss the framework of faith itself – in other words, the debate centred on whether that framework was valid or not. Consequently, *believing* became a matter of assenting to propositions, such as the proposition that God exists. The underlying assumption then became that maybe he does, and maybe he doesn't: people could form their own conclusion (or believe) either way. As a result, by the 19th century *believing* in common usage had lost all sense of commitment and been watered down to merely having an opinion.

This was dynamite for Christianity because, more than other religions, it has expressed its faith through creeds. So when the beliefs came under critical scrutiny, and churches made belief in the new sense of accepting the propositions not only a condition of membership but a pre-requisite

of faith, many people felt in all honesty that they could not comply and quietly dropped out of the church.

In our secular world, beliefs formulated in terms of the understandings of another era are proving obstacles to faith. Meanwhile many people have the idea that “believing” is primarily what religious people do. The churches have not done a lot to correct that impression, nor are they likely to until they find new words for *believe* and *belief*.

Of course there is an intellectual dimension to faith. But that dimension might be more readily explored if the churches were to put less emphasis on what people must believe, and instead help them to understand why certain ideas were expressed in certain ways in the past. They could then look for imaginative ways of expressing those ideas in terms of modern understandings of the way the world functions, so that secular people in a secular world might see the point, too.

Ian Harris

I do not mean that Christians will cease to be Christian, or Muslims Muslim. What I mean is that Christians will participate, as Christians, in the religious history of humankind....I am a Presbyterian...I participate as a deliberate though modified Calvinist in the Christian community, and the Christian process. In much the same way, I choose to participate as a Christian in the world process of religious convergence. For ultimately the only community there is, the one to which I know that I truly belong, is the community, world-wide and history-long, of humankind. *Wilfred Cantwell Smith*

For Religion was once, at the full and
 Stood like a mighty mountain range, in control
 But now I only see crumbling hillocks
 Their underlying melancholy, long, withdrawing, receding and
 retreating to the breath
 Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of a dying metropolis
 Where advancing troubles bring sentiency to attention
 And while the young, urgent and shouting for change
 At the old, on the edge of despair, shouting back with derision
 Humble rethinking religion might yet bring hope. *Doug Sellman*

Interesting Texts

Jewel is one of my absolute favourite singer/songwriters and below is one of my favourite songs. Words are important to her; she had a difficult time in her youth but always had her journal with her, in which she wrote down her thoughts and ideas. Although she is best known as a singer/songwriter, she is also a published poet and author. She was enormously fortunate in being mentored by Bob Dylan and Neil Young, who helped refine her songwriting skills.

The background of this song is as follows. When she was homeless and going through a dark time in her life, she began shoplifting and was trying to understand this behaviour.

“At first, it seemed impossible to notice my thoughts...I was not attentive enough to slow them down and assess them while they were happening. Instead I watched my hands. My hands were the servants of my thoughts. They carried out the physical impulses going on unseen in my mind...If I couldn't change my thoughts, perhaps I could reverse engineer the process. If I changed what my hands did, perhaps that would force me to change my thoughts.”

Much later, she emerged from a holiday in the mountains to learn of the attack on the twin towers in New York. On the radio, she heard the announcer dedicate her song “Hands” at that watershed in US history. ‘I/We are never broken’ comes up in the chorus. It is one of Jewel’s fundamental convictions. It’s the title of one of her books and also the URL of her website (jewelneverbroken.com). You might prefer to watch the Youtube video of the song rather than read the text: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfsS3pIDBfw

Hands

If I could tell the world just one thing
It would be that we're all OK
And not to worry 'cause worry is wasteful
And useless in times like these
I won't be made useless
I won't be idle with despair
I will gather myself around my faith
For light does the darkness most fear

[Chorus]
My hands are small, I know
But they're not yours, they are my own
But they're not yours, they are my own
And I am never broken

[Verse 2]
Poverty stole your golden shoes
It didn't steal your laughter
And heartache came to visit me
But I knew it wasn't ever after
We'll fight, not out of spite
For someone must stand up for what's right
'Cause where there's a man who has no voice
There ours shall go singing

[Chorus]
My hands are small I know
But they're not yours, they are my own
But they're not yours, they are my own
And I am never broken

[Bridge]
In the end, only kindness matters
In the end, only kindness matters
I will get down on my knees, and I will pray
I will get down on my knees, and I will pray
I will get down on my knees, and I will pray

[Chorus]
My hands are small, I know
But they're not yours, they are my own
But they're not yours, they are my own
And I am never broken

[Chorus]
My hands are small, I know
But they're not yours, they are my own
But they're not yours, they are my own
And I am never broken
We are never broken

[Outro]
We are God's eyes
God's hands
God's mind
We are God's eyes
God's hands
God's heart
We are God's eyes
We are God's hands
We are God's eyes.

Jewel